The Literary Encyclopedia

Samuel Butler (1835-1902)

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Essayist; Novelist; Art Theorist/ Historian/ Critic; Autobiographer; Poet; Scholar; Scientist. Active 1863-1902 in England

"I am the enfant terrible of literature and science", Samuel Butler wrote in the 1890s, during the heyday of his fame among contemporaries (1912, p. 183). "If I cannot, and I know I cannot, get the literary and scientific big-wigs to give me a shilling, I can, and I know I can, heave bricks into the middle of them" (ibid.). By thus fashioning himself as both an eccentric and an iconoclast with regard to the Victorian intellectual establishment, Butler accurately outlined his future reputation at least within the literary world. Apart from his biography itself, and despite his notable contributions to evolutionary theory, art history, bible studies, and literary scholarship, this reputation rests mainly on two of his books, only the first of which he probably had in mind at the time. These are, firstly, his bestselling Utopian satire *Erewhon*, whose publication in 1872 established Butler as a writer of standing, and, secondly, the even more celebrated family saga *The Way of All Flesh*, whose draft he intermittently worked on between 1872 and 1884, but which, partly due to its sensitive autobiographical content, was published only posthumously.

The Way of All Flesh draws heavily on Butler's upbringing in a household dominated by rigid religiosity and patriarchal discipline. This household was located in Langar, Nottinghamshire, where he was born as the second of four children of the Reverend Thomas Butler and his wife Fanny. Thomas was an Anglican clergyman and plant collector whose own father was the more eminent "Dr. Butler", the largely self-made and almost legendary headmaster of Shrewsbury public school, author of two standard textbooks on ancient geography, astute manager of his own highly profitable real-estate projects, and eventually Bishop of Lichfield. Whereas Samuel would spend much of the early 1890s writing his grandfather's biography and clearly felt some spiritual affinity to him, his relation to his father was fraught with mutual resentment. Samuel referred to Thomas Butler as his "most implacable enemy" (1984, p. 231), and many critics describe his intellectual brick-throwing as at least in part a reaction to the latter's domestic regime. His father's regular whipping, scolding and financial blackmail were rendered even more disheartening, in Samuel's eyes, by the unconscious religious bigotry and emotional manipulations of his mother.

After Shrewsbury, St John's College, Cambridge, and half a year of parish work in London, the young Butler came to reject Christianity and decided not to follow his father into the priesthood. Instead – and here his career strongly deviates from that of his fictional *alter ego* in *The Way of All Flesh* – he embarked on a journey to New Zealand in order to make his fortune as a sheep

farmer. His years in Canterbury Settlement from 1859 to 1864 proved formative in many respects: not only did they make him some money and convince his father to tolerate his artistic ambitions, they also laid the groundwork for much of his later writing. An essay draft from the period, in which Butler sceptically considers the biblical evidence for Christ's resurrection, forms the starting point of his mock-theological study *The Fair Haven* (1873). His pioneering explorations of the Rangitata River and nearby mountain ranges would leave direct textual traces in *Erewhon*, and so would the witty, early responses to Darwin's *Origin of Species* he published in the local Christchurch newspaper, *The Press*. These responses, moreover, marked the first stage of Butler's development as a scientific philosopher and critic of evolution, most notably his speculative essay "Darwin and the Machines" (1863) which prophetically anticipates questions of present-day cybernetics.

Having returned to London, established himself as a permanent bachelor at 15 Clifford's Inn, Fleet Street, and enrolled, among other schools, at the College of Art in South Kensington, Butler vainly attempted to learn how to paint like Bellini and gain admittance to the Royal Academy. A few of his paintings were, and still are, occasionally exhibited, and thus proved slightly more successful than his later attempts at Handel-inspired musical composition. Already in his own lifetime, however, both Butler's art and music were eclipsed by the books he produced. His first, *Erewhon*, was initially published anonymously and probably owed its immediate commercial success to being mistaken for a sequel to Edward Bulwer-Lytton's *The Coming Race* (1871). Since then, however, it has long outsold the latter and also garnered considerable critical acclaim. Butler's title is an anagram of 'nowhere' and, according to him, pronounced as three syllables. It evidently puns on the original Greek meaning of "Utopia" (utopos, i.e. "no place"), a genre of writing about ideal places which may be too good to really exist, and by being spelled backwards implies the anti-genre, "dystopia". And indeed, *Erewhon* designates a society discovered by the narrator in the backlands of an unnamed British colony. The minimal romance-and-abduction plot of the novel serves mostly as a vehicle for the detailed description of Erewhon, which in turn amounts to an incisive critique of contemporary British society. The term Utopia might nonetheless be slightly misleading since Erewhon is by no means held up as a political ideal. Instead, it is quite ambiguously affected by a number of curious inversions of real-world customs and institutions.

Examples of Erewhon's "perversions", as Butler's narrator calls them, are its courts, which rigorously punish people for illnesses and other misfortunes whereas conventional crimes are pitied and treated like diseases; its theology, which centres round a life before birth rather than after death and pays homage, among other deities, to the goddess Ydgrun (cf. the Victorian "Mrs. Grundy"); and its economy, which is based on two different currencies: one that is practically valueless but religiously venerated, and another that is widely condemned but in fact the only practically effective one. There are also the so-called "Colleges of Unreason", where young Erewhonians learn to defend the most glaring inconsistencies in an obsolete but socially prestigious idiom, as well as – in the context of Erewhon's luddite bible "The Book of the Machines" – the author's insightful transfer of the latest Darwinian ideas to the sphere of technology. Through his narrator's description of, and objections to, Erewhonian society, Butler

indirectly but effectively satirises some deeply entrenched assumptions both of his own time and beyond.

If, during the writing of *Erewhon*, Butler still considered himself an orthodox Darwinian, this had changed by the late 1870s. In 1878, following the already mentioned biblical study *The Fair Haven*, he published *Life and Habit*, in which he first takes serious issue with Darwin's theory of evolution. Briefly put, *Life and Habit* posits the existence of an unconscious memory that we inherit from our parents, activate if prompted to do so by our environment, add to and slightly modify by our own habits and purposive efforts, and finally pass on to our offspring. In Butler's view, it is this "hereditary memory" and its gradual accumulation of goal-oriented cunning that lead to the emergence of useful new traits and hence guide the course of evolutionary development. This stands in stark contrast to Darwin's view, who describes the emergence of variation as random, non-teleological, and certainly independent of any Lamarckian acts of volition. Yet as Butler recognised – and his book effectively exploits – the great biologist also had to admit ignorance as to how exactly it occurs.

The ideas proposed in *Life and Habit* constitute Butler's main contribution to nineteenth-century science and make up several of the "bricks" he saw himself as heaving. Their polemic reformulations and historical contextualisations in *Evolution Old and New* (1879), *Unconscious Memory* (1880), and *Luck or Cunning* (1887) add little of theoretical substance, but increasingly reflect Butler's own perceived mistreatment at the hands of Darwin and his followers. Arising from a complex misunderstanding involving some finer points of academic courtesy, Butler's personal misgivings quickly poisoned what had begun as an amicable dialogue. This, in turn, seriously damaged his reputation with the "scientific bigwigs". His undoubtedly original contribution went on to play a significant role in the early reception of evolutionary theory in France, but the British scientific establishment showed less and less concern about Butler's projectiles, so that, ultimately, their impact remained marginal.

In between his science-related writings, Butler also published an essayistic travel book about his favourite region in Northern Italy: *Alps and Sanctuaries* (1882) offers warmly appreciative accounts of the local sites, illustrated with the author's own drawings and paintings and perhaps most notable for including his first groundbreaking forays into the art-history of the Counter-Reformation. Butler returned to his art-historical interests in *Ex Voto* (1888), a more specialised and methodical study of the Sacro Monte at Varallo, this time supplemented by documentary state-of-the-art photographs he took on-site. In the long run – through *Alps and Sanctuaries*, *Ex Voto* and several journal articles related to the subject – he almost single-handedly ensured the lasting recognition of the regional chapel architecture and decorations, drawing attention to various previously unknown artists such as, most prominently, Gaudenzio Ferrari (1471-1546).

Butler's next major research projects were the already mentioned biography of his grandfather and one that, again, involved extensive travel and topographical studies – in Greece and Turkey as well as Italy. It started off with his re-reading of Homer for one of his musical compositions

and resulted not only in his highly readable and strongly modernising prose translations of the *Iliad* (1898) and *Odyssey* (1900), but also the first book-length "brick" of his that seemed directly aimed at the literary establishment. The book in question is *The Authoress of the Odyssey* (1897), which presents Homer's second masterpiece as the work of a woman predominantly interested in women's concerns. Drawing on intra-textual and historical evidence, various gender stereotypes, his own findings in the field, and the British admiralty charts of the Italian coastlines, Butler identifies as the poem's author the young princess Nausicaa. In addition, he locates both her and the various settings of the *Odyssey* not in Greece but Sicily, in and around the town of Trapani. In principle, the questions Butler asked fitted in with contemporary authorship debates and even his unusual methods of scholarship were soon absorbed into widespread academic practice. Yet, unsurprisingly, his answers still caused some heated controversy. With Homer's sex and the male-centredness of the *Odyssey*, after all, he was calling into question the foundation of public-school masculinity.

Among canonical poets, only Shakespeare would have been a comparable target, which may partly have motivated Butler's next work of literary criticism. *Shakespeare's Sonnets* (1899) interprets the famous sequence as a "very squalid" story of shifting sexual attractions (p. 86). In some respects, it resembles Oscar Wilde's "The Portrait of Mr. W. H." (1891), and might even constitute a veiled, if still markedly homophobic, defense of the publicly disgraced writer. Most pertinently in this regard, Butler detects in the sonnets a "sin of very early youth" on Shakespeare's part (p. 70), which basically consists of the Bard taking off his clothes for a lower-class "only begetter" only then to be laughed at and "roughly handled" rather than sexually regaled (ibid.). His work on Shakespeare's sonnets induced Butler to write a few notable ones of his own during the last years of his life. Most successful among these, and most often anthologised, has been the cruelly tragicomical trilogy "She was too kind, wooed too persistently" (1901), in which Butler bewails his lack of suitably erotic feeling for his fellow art student, sometime muse, literary advisor, and life-long friend Eliza Savage, whom he regularly consulted especially on *The Way of All Flesh*. The last published work of his, however, was again one of imaginative fiction. *Erewhon Revisited* (1901), the sequel to his first and by then still most popular book, returns to one of the earliest subjects of his satire: religion. It has the protagonist of *Erewhon* revisit the eponymous country only to find that in his absence a messianic cult has grown up around his person.

Butler himself might have received a similar impression if he had returned to literary London in the early decades of the twentieth century. Soon after his death, the publication of *The Way of All Flesh* (1903) turned him into an icon. Especially after some puffing from George Bernard Shaw and a second edition of the novel in 1908, Butler was widely hailed as the first great anti-Victorian. His attacks on the idea of the family and what was seen as the typically Victorian vices of self-righteousness, hypocrisy, and self-deception were found vastly liberating by the new generation of writers. Among his admirers were Shaw, H. G. Wells, and Edmund Gosse, but also the younger Bloomsbury modernists, D. H. Lawrence, Wyndham Lewis, and James Joyce. Their impression of Butler's modernism *avant-la-lettre* was further reinforced by *The Note-Books of Samuel Butler*, which were published in 1912 by a close friend of his and contained observations

such as: “We want a Society for the Suppression of Erudite Research and the Decent Burial of the Past. The ghosts of the dead past want quite as much laying as raising” (p. 180). The notebooks also included frank personal reflections on family, sex, death, etc., so that Butler’s private life attracted increasing attention. Based on the notes and his family saga, readers wondered for instance about Miss Savage – their letters to each other were published in 1935 – or about Butler’s long-lasting weekly arrangement with a prostitute. Yet, of course, they also turned to his other books. Joyce, for example, used his translation of the *Odyssey* when working on his own meticulously localised *Ulysses* (1922), while Robert Graves based his novel *Homer’s Daughter* (1955) on Butler’s authorship theory and also endorsed his reading of Shakespeare’s sonnets.

The 1930s brought a small backlash against Butler’s fame as a proto-modernist. Critics such as Malcolm Muggeridge would denounce him as in fact “the Ultimate Victorian” (1936, p. ix). Today, both assessments as well as the dichotomy itself are largely seen as modernist projections and studied as such by academics. Butler’s place in the literary canon has certainly not been endangered by the debate. As to particular works, his books on evolution have perhaps dated the most. Twentieth-century discoveries in genetics and molecular biology strongly support Darwin’s view of random variation and practically rule out any “hereditary memory” in Butler’s sense. Like his biblical and literary studies, though, his scientific ones are still highly prized as historical documents. Operating on the margins of their respective disciplines, they can arguably reveal more clearly than most mainstream writing the discursive boundaries between them. Having said that, Butler’s art-historical discoveries do form part of the mainstream today, *Erewhon* and *The Way of All Flesh* continue to be read as classics of English fiction, and, overall, his “mental offspring”, as he called his books (1912, p 366), have already survived far longer than he expected. Why should some authors “have this piece of good fortune more than others”, he asks in another characteristic passage from his notebooks (1912, p. 362): “The answer is that it would be very unjust if they knew anything about it, and could enjoy it in any way, but they know nothing whatever about it, so that it is really you, the complainer, who get the fun, not they, and this should stop your mouth.”

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